

Under the Dome: The Apples and Oranges Legislature

Republicans and Democrats face the 2015 legislative session with a lack of a shared reality.

By John Stang
Seattle CrossCut



They just don't compare. Photo: Robert Couse-Baker

When it comes to the 2015-2017 budget, Republicans and Democrats live in an apples-and-oranges universe.

They don't agree on a common set of figures to begin their budget crunching and negotiating. They don't agree on whether the state even faces a huge budget shortfall for 2015-2017. They don't agree on whether extra revenue needs to be scrounged up to make the state government work properly. They don't have a common target for the amount of money needed to comply with the 2012 Washington Supreme Court's "McCleary" ruling to improve the student-teacher ratios in Grade K-3. Neither party has any idea how to cope with Initiative 1351, which requires similar student-teacher-ratio improvements in Grades 4-12.

Gov. Jay Inslee and the four legislative caucus leaders and four caucus budget writers talked to the press at an Associated Press forum in Olympia on Jan. 8. Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina and the House Democrats' chief budget writer, told the forum that the two sides don't have common definitions and base numbers to begin their complicated budget negotiations. "It'd be helpful if we're talking about the same set of facts," he said. The Democrat-controlled House and the Republican-controlled Senate will likely unveil their 2015-2017 budget proposals in March.

In December, Inslee unveiled his 2015-2017 biennial budget proposal of \$39 billion, which is significantly larger than the \$34.1 billion 2013-2015 budget. Inslee's budget includes charging polluters by the amount of carbon pollution to funnel most of that money to education and transportation; a new capital gains tax; an extra \$1 billion to comply with the 2012 Supreme Court ruling; a cigarette tax increase; and closure of some tax breaks. It also puts only a tiny dent into the state's predicted \$2.24 billion obligation in the upcoming biennium for I-1351, the class-size ballot measure passed last November. Inslee wants to punt on most of the I-1351 obligation, saying the money is not there.

Meanwhile, Sen. Andy Hill, R-Redmond and chairman of the Senate Ways & Means Committee, told the forum that \$36.2 billion will be needed in 2015-2017 to maintain all programs at their present levels. He added that the state expects to collect \$37.2 billion in revenue for the same biennium, giving the Legislature \$1 billion in surplus money. He said that \$1 billion can pay for \$750 million in McCleary mandates plus cover a cost-of-living raise for teachers, which has been delayed for several years.

"To say we have a multi-billion-dollar budget crisis is not a fair assessment of the situation.... To say we have a huge budget problem is just to scare people," said Hill said.

However, Hill's \$37.2 billion figure does not include \$2.24 billion for the I-1351 obligations nor the several hundred million extra dollars likely needed for more progress on McCleary. Hill's \$750 million McCleary figure is a minimum to obtain the needed equipment and materials. Any money above \$750 million for actual additional teachers would be added in the upcoming budget talks, he said. It was unclear whether Hill's \$37.2 billion would include \$583 million in negotiated pay raises for state employees. When court-ordered mental health improvements are added to the picture, roughly \$4 billion would be needed above a don't-add-anything budget.

"The question is: 'Do we need \$4 billion in new taxes?' ... I don't think we need any," Hill said.

Hunter said he does not know what Hill has included in his \$36.2 billion base budget. Hunter estimated that \$1.36 billion for rooms, materials and teaching hirings would be needed in 2015-2017 to meet the Supreme Court's timetable. The Supreme Court has been unhappy that the McCleary work — totaling \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion from 2013 to 2019 — was underfunded with only \$1 billion allocated in 2013-2015. The court has threatened sanctions against the Legislature if it does not come up with an adequate catch-up plan in the 2015 session. Hunter did not have an overall 2015-2017 budget target at the forum.